

To Build A Safe Gig, Follow The Baba

How to secure rights for gig workers – with no single employer, fixed hours of work, or common workplace? K'taka gets a new law whose foundation was laid over 50 years ago by a young doctor

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Karnataka's legislation for gig workers kicked in in Nov, mere weeks before the man who built the timeless foundation for such a

law, passed away at age 95. A tall trade union leader, it is Baba Adhav's work of 75 years that has become first principles to secure the labour rights and dignity for contemporary India's unorganised sector – over 90% of the workforce.

It all goes back to the early 1950s, when a young 22-year-old doctor with socialist ideals began working in Pune. One of the first groups Adhav set out to organise were 'hamals' – headloaders who carried heavy sacks on their heads and backs. Migrants from surrounding rural areas, they had no fixed employer, moved from shop to shop negotiating rates, and had extremely short working lives due to the physical nature of their work. In a crisis, there was no fallback. The three cornerstones of workers' rights, fair wages, safe working conditions, and social security, were entirely absent.

Organising hamals was extraordinarily difficult. Yet through years of persistent organising, struggle and negotiation, Adhav and the Hamal Panchayat achieved a breakthrough that would permanently alter the imagination of labour rights in India. They evolved a legal and institutional framework that brought workers, employers and the state onto a common platform through what later became the Mathadi (Headloaders) Board.

This tripartite structure solved what many had believed to be an unsolvable problem: how to secure rights for workers with no single employer, fixed hours of work, or a common workplace. Hamals who had lived on individually negotiated piece-rate payments were now registered en masse, along with employers who had long evaded responsibility. Instead of being paid cash per sack, workers collected coupons and received composite monthly payments at rates fixed through tripartite negotiations. A levy on each sack, funded social security including provident fund, gratuity, workers' compensation, bonus, and administrative costs. It was a stroke of institutional genius, and

remains the most influential model for unorganised sector welfare boards in India.

Over time, it became clear that Adhav's work with the hamals shaped a far wider vision of workers' rights. The model inspired waste pickers, domestic workers, auto-rickshaw drivers, and street vendors to demand recognition and collective structures of their own. Central to this imagination was Adhav's early articulation that pensions and social security are the composite burden of every employer, of the entire sector, and of society. This principle continues to sit at the heart of ongoing debates on universal social protection.

The transformative impact of this kind of creative trade



unionism, is visible in Pune's Hamal Colony, with dignified housing, schools, a bank and the iconic community kitchen 'Kashtachi Bhakri': bread of your labour. Seeing the nutritional hardship faced by workers, the union created a kitchen that provided nutritious meals across the city. Run largely by women, food was transported daily to fixed locations. For 50 uninterrupted years, through bandhs, riots, and natural calamities, this kitchen has, on a no-profit basis, fed nearly 10,000 people a day.

Adhav's vision of justice drew from Phule and Ambedkar to advance equality and inter-caste solidarity. During the 1970s drought, he and other socialist leaders

challenged caste inequality in rural Maharashtra by fanning out to rural areas, demanding a single, state-managed drinking water source in every village – "ekgaon, ek panghat". This arrangement should inspire us to demonstrate how public delivery systems, from water at MGNREGA worksites to mid-day meals when delivered by members of socially marginalised communities, can help confront and dismantle social prejudices.

Depth of Adhav's contribution becomes even clearer when viewed in light of contemporary labour struggles. One of the fastest-growing sectors today is the gig economy, where workers operate without employer recognition or legal protection. For over a decade, gig workers remained trapped in a legal vacuum, with aggregators denying any responsibility.

The breakthrough came when gig workers unions and social movements in India drew inspiration from the Mathadi model. Registering workers and employers, fixing social security contributions per transaction, and creating a collective identity for a scattered workforce offered a ready framework for the digital age in India, and beyond.

In Nov 2025, Karnataka became a pioneer in labour protection for gig workers by notifying the Karnataka Platform based Gig Workers Act. By fixing employer responsibility for every transaction, the law demonstrates how digital systems can scale what was once done manually, enabling auto-registration, tracking of worker rights, and more transparent, worker-oriented boards. With adaptation, this model could extend to and empower much of India's unorganised workforce.

The conceptual roots of this architecture lie in Adhav's pioneering work and hamal unions of Pune, beginning 75 years ago. None of this came easily. The workers' 'Baba' was jailed 52 times in independent India advocating causes that only demonstrated ways of putting constitutional values into practice. Even at age 94, he undertook a successful hunger strike to protect the Mathadi Act.

Baba Adhav's contribution shows justice for workers requires perseverance, structural imagination, institutional creativity and collective action by working people themselves.

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